

## VOCABULARY ANALYSIS AND THE GENERIC CLASSIFICATION OF LITERATURE

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ALTHOUGH MOST SCHOLARS have not viewed the book in this way, *Style and Tradition in Catullus*, by David O. Ross, Jr., is more than a book about Catullus; it implies a theory of genres for the history of Latin elegy and epigram which is also taken for granted in his recent book on Gallus.<sup>1</sup> As the title of his first book indicates, Ross attempts to analyze the style and vocabulary of Catullus' poems and to avoid the more customary questions of theme and subject matter. His study concludes that the polymetrical poems and the long poems are stylistically similar, while the epigrams belong to an entirely different poetic tradition; the method for making this distinction, as Ross acknowledges, is borrowed from the work of Bertil Axelsson.<sup>2</sup> Whether or not these traditions can be so distinguished, Ross's method and the assumptions which underlie it need to be examined before the validity of his conclusions can be considered.

Perhaps the best way to begin our discussion of Ross's method of vocabulary analysis is to examine closely the method in operation. The section of *Style and Tradition in Catullus* devoted to diminutives seems ideal (pages 22-26). Diminutives are words often cited as being used "colloquially," and so we would expect to find them in the shorter poems. But Ross concludes that they are characteristic of the polymetrics and long poems, uncharacteristic of the epigrams. The evidence upon which he bases his conclusions merits detailed consideration.

According to Ross (23), "diminutives are common in the elevated longer poems (27 used 36 times). They are also very common in the polymetric poems (45 used 65 times) but uncommon in the epigrams (7 used 9 times)." But are these figures conclusive? If we calculate the average number of lines per occurrence, we find that 1 diminutive occurs every 13 lines in the polymetrics, 1 every 31 lines in the long poems, and 1 every 35 lines in the epigrams. Diminutives seem almost as common in the epigrams as in the long poems. And in a footnote, Ross admits that

<sup>1</sup>David O. Ross, Jr., *Style and Tradition in Catullus* (Cambridge, Mass. 1969)—hereafter cited as Ross. For Ross's reliance upon the findings of this work in his new book see *Backgrounds to Augustan Poetry: Gallus, Elegy and Rome* (Cambridge 1975) 4, n. 2, and 8, n. 2.

<sup>2</sup>B. Axelsson, *Unpoetische Wörter. Ein Beitrag zur Kenntnis der lateinischen Dichtersprache* (Lund 1945). See Ross 4 for his acknowledgement of Axelsson. I realize that there is a problem in using the terms "elegy" and "epigram" to describe Catullus' poetry. In this essay I will use the terms as Ross does. Poems 1-60 are "polymetrics." Poems 61-68 are "long poems." Poems 65-68 are "elegies." Poems 69-116 are "epigrams."

certain scholars have found more diminutives in the epigrams than those he counts. One scholar, for example, seems to count *auricula*; Ross does not, nor does he explain why. He also rejects an entire class of diminutives such as *mentula* and *tremulus* because their positives are not found in extant classical Latin. The problem is that first we must accept Ross's hypothesis that there is some reason why Catullus avoided diminutives in the epigrams, and then we must conclude that whatever this reason was, it did not apply to words which must have resembled diminutives to Catullus. Ross never demonstrates why we need to do this. But if only one of the doubtful cases is accepted into our count, we will find 8 diminutives used 10 times, or more than 1 every 32 lines, which is nearly the same proportion as in the long poems. If all of them are accepted, or if *mentula* alone, with its many occurrences in the epigrams, is accepted, we would find nearly as high a proportion of diminutives in the epigrams as in the polymetrics. To strengthen his argument Ross also suggests that we can see the same avoidance of diminutives in pre-Catullan epigram, for only 1 appears in all of the extant epigrams (25). But aside from the fragments at Pompeii, there are only 24 lines of pre-Catullan epigram, and a ratio of 1 for every 24 lines is higher than the ratio in the long poems. We should also note that some diminutives can only be used in the polymetrics, since they contain a cretic; this would tend to lessen the number of occurrences in the long poems and epigrams.<sup>3</sup> It should be clear that the statistical basis for Ross's conclusion in this section is tenuous. It is far from certain that diminutives are "uncommon" in Catullan epigram, or that the epigrams must *therefore* descend from a different tradition than the other poems.<sup>4</sup>

Before we leave his discussion of diminutives, we should also examine how Ross treats words which do not conform to his hypothesis. He argues that diminutives "are often used to convey the idea of effeminacy . . . . It is not surprising, then, to find 4 used 5 times in c. 99, addressed to *mellite Iuventi*, without which poem the number in the epigrams would be reduced to 4 used 4 times. Such a tone of delicacy, however, has its proper place in the polymetrics and longer poems: the epigrams obviously, except for an occasional experiment like c. 99, belong to a sterner tradition" (24). Unfortunately, this argument is circular. The stated purpose of the study is to examine the style and vocabulary of the poetry and to avoid consideration of subject matter, but here Ross uses

<sup>3</sup>For this observation I am indebted to the anonymous referee, who suggested *palmulis* and *integellum* as examples of diminutives with cretics.

<sup>4</sup>J. Granarolo, *Latomus* 30 (1971) 442 also sees problems in Ross's analysis of diminutives. J. P. Elder, "Notes on Some Conscious and Subconscious Elements in Catullus' Poetry," *HSCP* 60 (1951) 111-112 concludes that the epigrams show a stylistic similarity to the long poems when the diminutives are examined. Elder uses the statistics of J. Svennung, *Catullus Bildersprache* (Uppsala 1945).

contextual analysis to reclassify a poem which does not conform to his theory. To be sure, Ross uses contextual analysis because he senses that statistics by themselves are misleading, but this should cause us to wonder why the statistics are presented so systematically, if they can be so easily modified or discarded.<sup>5</sup>

Such statistical difficulties are not limited to Ross's discussion of diminutives, but rather pervade his entire discussion of vocabulary. Perhaps one more example will suffice. Ross devotes a large amount of space in Part I to particles, conjunctions, prepositions, and interjections because, as he states in his introduction, these words provide more reliable figures.<sup>6</sup> One of these discussions, that of *enim* on pages 74-76, deserves special consideration. It not only provides another example of tenuous statistical presentation, but also points to a further weakness in Ross's method—the problem of what constitutes a “poetic word.”

The word *enim* appears only 3 times in Catullus, at 12.8-9, 35.17-18, and 63.62. Ross argues that Catullus avoids *enim* in the epigrams. “The purpose of *enim*,” he concludes, “is entirely neoteric; its appearance in the polymetrics and in c. 63 might have been predicted” (76). One difficulty is immediately apparent. Since there are only 3 occurrences of *enim* in poems 1-68 (1968 lines), there is only 1 occurrence every 656 lines. And since there are only 319 lines of epigram, there is less than a 50 per cent chance that *enim* would be found there, even if Catullus were not avoiding the word. *Enim* is so rare in Catullus that any generalization would be risky, let alone one based on only 319 lines. Here again, as in the discussion of diminutives, Ross's statistics seem questionable.

There is another difficulty in Ross's discussion of *enim* which should be considered. According to his own argument, *enim* can be used poetically, when it appears in an epic formula, or prosaically, as it is used in Roman satire and comedy (75). He argues that in Poem 63 it is used poetically, whereas in the polymetrics it appears without epic formula and is “affirmative” rather than “causal”; this usage is common in Plautus and Terence, although Ross finds four occurrences in Virgil “so used for archaic effect” (75-76). There will be more to say about the poetic/prosaic distinction later; here I would like only to discuss Ross's statistical analysis. The thesis of the book is that prosaic, traditional vocabulary is found in the epigrams, while more experimental vocabulary is found in poems 1-68. He also argues that the Augustan elegists imitated

<sup>5</sup>Ross denies the importance of statistics on pages 5, 6, 7, and 13 of his introduction. Yet this must be balanced against the largely statistical presentation of evidence in pages 17-137.

<sup>6</sup>“The discussion has thus been restricted to words which are common enough (particles, conjunctions, prepositions) to provide reliable figures and whose history and development in the poetic vocabulary are well known, or to types of words which clearly indicate the purpose for which they were used in any group or groups of poems” (Ross 5).

the style of the polymetrics and the long poems, rather than the traditional style of the epigrams. But here we have a word which seems to be used in the prosaic fashion of comedy, and which we would expect to find in the epigrams. Ross argues that the two instances in the polymetrics appear in "typical neoteric contexts. . . . In such contexts prosaic words invariably have no place, and the force of *enim* is to be understood from the clear pattern of its later poetic usage" (page 76). But aside from the four "archaic" instances in Virgil, this later "pattern" refers to occurrences with epic formulae. The poetic and prosaic usages of *enim* are not easily distinguishable, and it is far from clear that *enim* is being avoided in the epigrams of Catullus.

At this point the general weakness of any approach to the literary style of Catullus based on word-frequency should be apparent. Catullus' poetry is simply too small a sample to yield conclusive statistics.<sup>7</sup> This difficulty is compounded by the fact that the epigrams constitute a very small portion of an already small body of poetry. Poems 1-68 contain 1968 lines, while poems 69-116 contain only 319, or about 14 per cent of the entire corpus. Furthermore, to see how small the amount of what Ross would consider "typical epigram" really is, we need to bear in mind the number of poems which he considers "experimental polymetrics in epigrammatic form" (7). It was noted above that Poem 99 is of this type. Poems 69, 80, and 86 are also placed in this category, and probably Poem 116.<sup>8</sup> In addition, 5 lines from 2 other poems seem to be considered "experimental" (3 from 88 and 2 from 115); if these lines (a total of 53) are subtracted from the sum of 319, we are left with only 266 lines of epigram which are not "experimental," or slightly more than 11.5 per cent of Catullus' poetry.<sup>9</sup> It must be emphasized that in so small a sample,

<sup>7</sup>Ross acknowledges this problem on page 5. For a humorous attack on the statistical approach to literature see Douglas Young, "Miltonic Light on Professor Denys Page's Homeric Theory," *G&R* 6 (1959) 96-108. Young demonstrates that statistics can be used to show that different Miltons wrote *Paradise Lost* and the rest of his works. G. Udny Yule also gives a number of warnings in *The Statistical Study of Literary Vocabulary* (Cambridge 1944). See also John M. Gleason, "Unused words as an Index of Style," *CSCA* 6 (1974) 77-90; analyzing Syme's lists of "unused words" from Tacitus and Sallust, Gleason concludes that given the amount of Latin vocabulary and the chances of overlap between authors, it would be unreasonable to expect many of Syme's words to appear in any particular Roman historian.

<sup>8</sup>Consider the following comments by Ross: "but the poem [69] itself is experimental" (110); "This single instance occurs in the first line of a Gellius poem, c. 80, in a context of homosexuality and again with a diminutive . . . : this instance must be regarded as another experiment in the epigrams" (63; see also 24, n. 34, and 137); "c. 86, its context in Catullus, may be regarded as one of the few neoteric experiments among the epigrams" (58). On Poem 116, see pages 58 and 131.

<sup>9</sup>The lines from 88 are considered on pages 103 and 137, those from 115 on page 103. In addition, Ross implies experimentation in poems 78 (111), 81 (111), 95 (137), and 100 (131). If these poems were counted as "experimental," our percentage would be reduced to barely 10 per cent of the corpus.

many peculiarities of vocabulary might occur which are actually due to mere chance. In comparing 10–15 per cent of an author's work to the other 85–90 per cent, one or two examples can significantly offset the statistics, as was seen above in the discussion of diminutives.

I have noted that the distinction between poetic and prosaic words plays a large role in Ross's analysis of Catullus. The use of this distinction raises several questions. Since Ross acknowledges Axelson's work on page 4 of his introduction and uses that scholar's distinctions and statistics throughout the book, Gordon Williams' criticism of Axelson in *Tradition and Originality in Roman Poetry* needs to be considered.<sup>10</sup> Three of the criticisms which Williams offers seem to bear directly on Ross's study. First, Axelson assumes that the Romans had a "poetic vocabulary" which was distinct from a "prose vocabulary." Such a vocabulary seems to be distinguishable in Greek literature and is discussed in Roman literary theory, but Williams finds no evidence of such a vocabulary in Latin poetry itself. Second, Williams notes that it is very difficult to control the problem of poets' "avoiding" certain words. As he says, "the nearest approach that is made by Axelson is the assertion that the larger a poet's work the greater is the likelihood that he would have used a certain word, and that therefore, since he did not use it, he not only made a deliberate decision not to use it but had the same grounds for making that decision as the other poets who did not use it" (744). Third, Williams argues that it is much more difficult to put Roman poetry into a generic hierarchy than it is for Greek literature. Axelson creates such a hierarchy in an attempt to distinguish the genres solely on the basis of vocabulary.

It is to Ross's credit that he anticipates at least the second of these objections against his method and attempts to answer it in his introduction. He asserts that by a "conscious" decision he means a "natural" decision rather than an "artificially conscious effort," but this seems to contradict a statement on the same page: "the demands made upon poetic vocabulary by each genre, and the limits set by any genre, were likewise a natural part of the education and sensibility of every good poet" (7). This comment, along with the assertions throughout the book that Catullus is not "allowed" to use certain vocabulary, seems to suggest the very position Williams attacks. It never becomes clear what a "naturally conscious effort," as opposed to an "artificially conscious effort," is supposed to entail.

<sup>10</sup>G. Williams, *Tradition and Originality in Roman Poetry* (Oxford 1968) 743–750—hereafter cited as Williams. As near as I can tell, none of the reviews of Ross mentions either Williams or Axelson, although F. O. Copley, *CW* 64 (1970) 26 sees that there is a problem in talking about "poetic words." To my knowledge, only Carl A. Rubino, "Myth and Mediation in the Attis Poem of Catullus," *Ramus* 3 (1974) 172 suggests that Ross and Williams need to be discussed in conjunction.

Williams' third criticism of Axelson, that of creating a generic hierarchy, is also applicable to Ross. Ross's hierarchy is based on the assumptions that Latin "poetic words" are used in elegy and in Catullus' neoteric poetry, but avoided in epigram, and that statistics will reveal which words Catullus is avoiding in each genre. Although Ross treats meter and word order, and although these treatments are on much firmer statistical ground than Part I of the book,<sup>11</sup> his primary method of generic classification remains vocabulary. This is clear from his statement that "Axelson also demonstrates that it is possible to distinguish between genres solely on the basis of vocabulary, and that the history of any genre may be traced by studying the development of its vocabulary" (4). While Ross only occasionally discusses the genres other than elegy and epigram, he does find Axelson's generic classifications useful throughout the book.

This leads us back to Williams' first criticism of Axelson, and to what is perhaps the greatest difficulty in Ross's study. Ross readily assumes the existence of a Latin "poetic vocabulary" and is consistently able to make such statements as "Catullus has 14 compound adjectives used 15 times in the polymetrics, 29 used 35 times in the longer poems, but only *sesquipedalis* (97.5) in the epigrams. *Sesquipedalis* can be dismissed immediately as a prose word" (18). *Sesquipedalis* may or may not be a "prose word." What is important is that Ross does not say why this word is a "prose word," or even what constitutes a "prose word." He does mention in a footnote that the word appears only twice elsewhere in extant classical Latin poetry. Frequency of use seems to be the criterion, and evidently three occurrences are not enough. But Ross never indicates what the terms "poetic" and "prosaic" mean. In fact, his only indication that this might be a problem is found in his introduction, where he says that "What is meant by 'poetic vocabulary' will become apparent in the course of the discussion and need not be rigidly defined here" (4). He immediately refers the reader to Axelson, yet Marouzeau has noted that Axelson also leaves the terms "poetic" and "prosaic" undefined.<sup>12</sup> It seems to me that not only does the distinction never "become apparent" in Ross's book but that the problem is compounded by two difficulties. First, Ross assumes that what is prosaic is also "Roman" and "traditional," while what is poetic, in the poetry of Catullus at least, is also "neoteric," by which he seems to mean influenced by Greek practice.<sup>13</sup> This assumption makes the poetic/prosaic distinction even more difficult

<sup>11</sup>Ross 115-137. Unlike particular words, meter and word order appear in every line, and, if such a distinction is meaningful, are perhaps more "poetic" than vocabulary.

<sup>12</sup>J. Marouzeau, *REL* 24 (1946) 320-321.

<sup>13</sup>N. B. Crowther, "Catullus and the Traditions of Latin Poetry," *CP* 66 (1971) 246-249, gives evidence which makes such a rigid distinction doubtful.

to accept. Second, the small size of Catullus' work forces Ross to concentrate on the less significant words, such as conjunctions and prepositions. It seems more likely that a "poetic vocabulary," if there were such a thing, would be found among nouns, verbs, and adjectives, although Ross's attention to statistics precludes him from considering these words in proportionately great detail.

Perhaps we can see the difficulties which these distinctions cause for Ross if we examine the section of the book dealing with "Lesbia and the Vocabulary of Political Alliance" (80-95). In that discussion, Ross argues that the words used in the epigrams to describe his affair with Lesbia are the technical terms of contemporary party politics and that this usage distinguishes the epigrams from the other poems. He concludes that this vocabulary, like the rest of the vocabulary of the epigrams, is "Roman and unpoetic" (94). That these words are Roman, no one would deny, but how are they unpoetic? The natural conclusion would be that Catullus used these words in an unconventional manner, thereby making them poetic. This conclusion is bolstered by the finding that the words, with the possible exception of *amicitia*, are used repeatedly with Catullus' meaning by the Augustan elegists.<sup>14</sup> But since Ross is arguing that the elegists were not influenced by the epigrams, he concludes that "it must be enough merely to suggest that both the *foedus* and the *fides* between lovers in Augustan elegy are quite different from what they had been in Catullus, in spite of the superficial similarities in the way they are used" (94). It would be more logical to conclude that the elegists were influenced by at least some of the material in the epigrams, and that Catullus' use of the "political vocabulary" was an innovation which became popular. It is difficult to see how such a metaphorical, and almost allegorical use of vocabulary could possibly be called "prosaic," but in any case these assumptions seem to be necessary solely because of the distinction between poetic and prosaic words, and the assumptions about tradition and novelty which accompany it.

Not all critics define Latin literary genres in terms of their vocabulary, nor do all scholars find classifications such as "elegy" or "epigram" suitable for ancient poetry.<sup>15</sup> There is not time here to consider these alternative explanations of genre. But it can be said that we should not reject these theories in favor of a purely formalistic view of genre such

<sup>14</sup>E. Paludan, "The Development of the Latin Elegy," *ClMed* 4 (1941) 208-226, gives full references for the Augustan elegists' use of these words. My position here closely reflects her viewpoint.

<sup>15</sup>For example, Georg Luck, *The Latin Love Elegy*<sup>2</sup> (London 1969), notes the work of Axelson on page 21, but defines the genre by its erotic and personal nature; F. Cairns, *Generic Composition in Greek and Roman Poetry* (Edinburgh 1972), attempts to explore a different system of genres based strictly on content.

as Ross's until a number of questions are answered. First, is it possible to distinguish genres solely on formal grounds, or is it necessary to discuss content as well? Second, if genres can be distinguished formally, is vocabulary by itself sufficient, or should we look also at other formal criteria? Third, did the ancient poets themselves view their craft in this way? Finally, is there a sufficient quantity of Latin poetry available to us to enable us to establish adequate formal criteria for these genres? Ross gives an affirmative answer to the first two of these questions on page 4 of his introduction. He does not discuss the latter two specifically, but they seem closely tied to the first two. I hope that my analysis of his method indicates that these questions need to be carefully reconsidered.

I can find no proponents of the theory of "subjective-erotic elegy" who have responded to Ross's vocabulary analyses in detail.<sup>16</sup> It also seems peculiar that although Ross presents Catullus as writing a group of neoteric poems and a group of traditional poems, the Catullan scholars who wish to unify Catullus' poetry have not adequately responded to the book; although Ross's argument attempts to show similarity between the polymetrics and the long poems and hence poses problems for those who would talk about "two Catulluses," it also implies that the epigrams could not have been a part of what Quinn calls the "Catullan revolution."<sup>17</sup> We must be cautious, and approach this book with the tentativeness Ross himself exhibits in his introduction. Unless more of the epigrammatic tradition is discovered, it is unlikely that Ross's hypothesis will be verified or disproven; but a response to the important questions about generic classification which are posed by *Style and Tradition in Catullus* is long overdue.<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>16</sup>J. David Bishop, "Catullus 76: Elegy or Epigram?," *CP* 67 (1972) 293-294 argues specifically against Ross, but does not discuss Ross's method in detail.

<sup>17</sup>K. Quinn, *The Catullan Revolution* (Revised impression Cambridge 1969). On pages 38-43, Quinn argues for "levels of intent" in the epigrams. For a "unified" Catullus, see J. P. Elder (above, n. 4) 101-112; K. Quinn, "Docte Catulle," *Critical Essays on Roman Literature: Elegy and Lyric*, ed. J. P. Sullivan (Cambridge, Mass. 1962) 31-63.

<sup>18</sup>Professors Carl A. Rubino and M. Gwyn Morgan have provided much valuable criticism of this paper. It does not follow that they agree with the views presented herein.